

# The Cynic's Brebiary

Maxims and Anecdotes from  
Nicolas de Chamfort



LONDON: ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO STREET, W.

A SONG TO DAVID. By CHRISTOPHER SMART.

With an Introduction by R. A. STEVENSON.

Fcap. 8vo. 1s. net.

"One of the finest outbursts of lyric genius in the eighteenth century, perhaps the finest before the advent of Wordsworth. . . . Beginning very right when he waxed glorious over this beautiful landscape on the best of soil and strong."—*Lead my*.

"Smart is the only man who has written one poem such as this, which not only transcends absolutely all his other work, but he is at his highest powers on a level with all but the very greatest poets."—*Century*.

"The ritual of the poem is utterly without any thing of the conventional century verse, never thicketed but continuous with a continuous flow of images. . . . It would be hard to find another poem of the kind in which the reader is carried so triumphantly up to the hills where the writer has pleased to place him."—*Gleaner*.

NEPENTHE. A Poem in two Cantos. By GEORGE DARLEY.

With an Introduction by R. A. STEVENSON.

Fcap. 8vo. 2s. 6d. net.

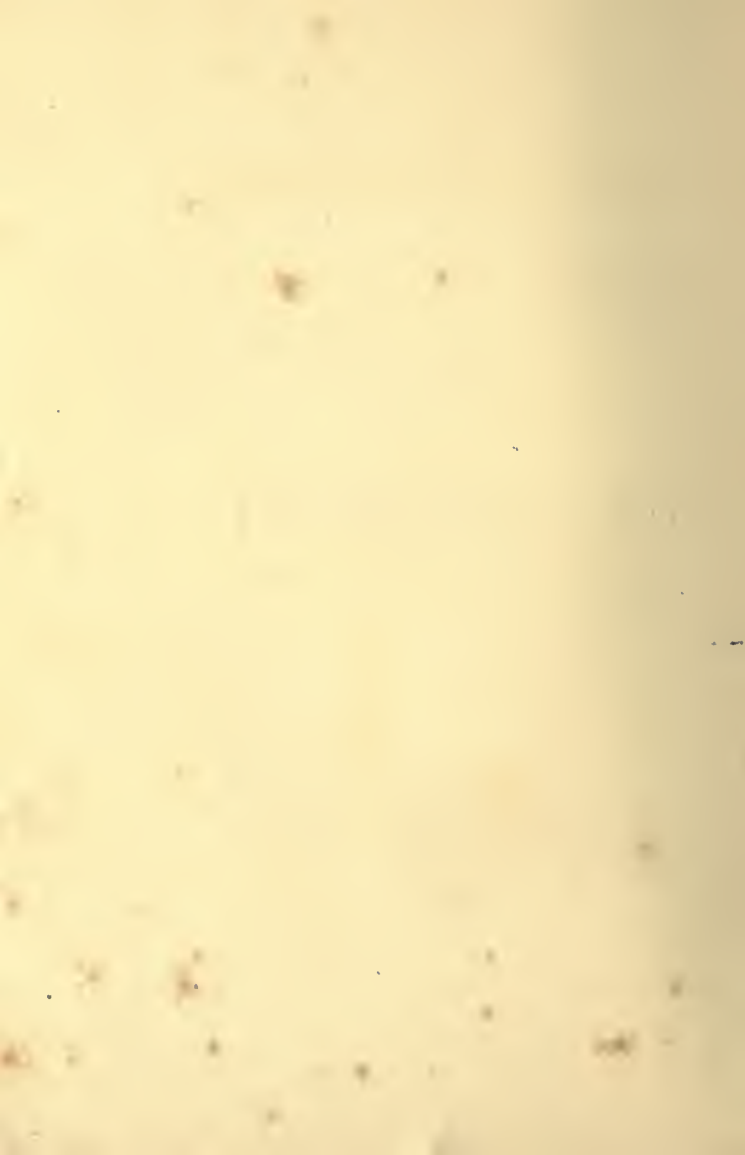
"We have read 'Nepenthe' with admiration. It is young and vigorous and delicate; it 'sings' April and May. . . . George Darley gives us an extraordinary contribution to literature."—*Illustrated*.

"No one can open the volume before us without being struck with the wealth of imagination and fancy, and with the most perfect poetry of which nature is at every point."—*Illustrated*.

"The poetry is wonderful. It places all else. How beautiful it is! It is wonderful. Every line, he takes from nature and from philosophy, and then it can be the only. . . . I have enjoyed the 'Nepenthe' poem more than I can tell."—*Illustrated*, vol. 2, p. 212.

LONDON: ELKIN MATHEWS, V. & S. 1900. W.

THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY



THE  
CYNIC'S BREVIARY

*MAXIMS AND ANECDOTES FROM  
NICOLAS DE CHAMFORT*

SELECTED AND TRANSLATED BY  
WILLIAM G. HUTCHISON

LONDON  
ELKIN MATHEWS  
VIGO STREET

1902



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2007 with funding from  
Microsoft Corporation

## Preface

SÉBASTIEN-ROCH NICOLAS DE CHAMFORT was born in 1741 and died in 1794. Thus he traversed almost the whole of the latter half of the century, that in France began with the closing years of one great ruler and ended with the accession to supreme power of another—the century of social license and colloquial philosophy, of encyclopædists and actresses, of blue-stockings and wits. He knew every one worth knowing—Voltaire, Madame Dubarry, Diderot, Charlotte Corday, Helvetius, Made-  
moiselle de L'Espinasse, St. Just, Marie:

## PREFACE

Antoinette, and all the other prominent figures of that fascinating age. Most essentially he was a man of his time, a misanthrope who shone in society, a cynic with a curious vein of humanitarian optimism.

About his birth hangs much mystery. A M. Mège has proved, to his own satisfaction at least, that Chamfort was the lawful offspring of a respectable grocer, but all other authorities agree that he was an illegitimate child, though they are far from being unanimous in assigning his father and mother. That paternity is a matter of opinion, maternity a matter of fact is an old piece of wisdom, but in this case even the latter is doubtful. The one point certain is that the only name to which our author was legally entitled was Nicolas. The Chamfort with its aristocratic "de" was his own in-



## PREFACE

vention, just as Molière was that of Poquelin, Voltaire of Arouet, D'Alembert of Jean Lerond. Influence won Chamfort a good education, and at school and collège he played the part of youthful prodigy in two ways; he carried off prizes and in the end was rusticated for writing lampoons on the professors. A few months' nomad existence in Normandy with two other scapegraces followed, and then the prodigal returned, was forgiven and became an abbé. Lest he be accused of hypocrisy in thus taking orders, I must hasten to say that no particular sanctity of life or opinions was essential to an abbé of that period. "The abbés," says M. Houssaye, "were amiable pagans living gaily outside the Church, who read a different sense into the scriptures from that in vogue now. They went to the Court, to balls and the Opera ;

## PREFACE

they masked and dabbled in adventure—and they said their prayers after supper.”

Chamfort's instincts naturally drew him to literature both as a means of support and as a path to society. But, like other aspirants, he found editors and publishers unappreciative, and he was growing weary of his efforts when one day he happened on an old schoolfellow who had entered the Church, but, so he confessed, was always at a loss for words in the pulpit. “Listen to me,” said Chamfort, and he delivered a glowing apostrophe to his ill fortune. Lost in admiration the priest promptly offered a louis apiece for any sermons Chamfort would write for him. The bargain was concluded, a sermon was composed weekly and the preacher declaimed his second-hand thunder to the satisfaction of himself and his flock. But Chamfort

## PREFACE

aimed higher than devilling for the clergy and won a reputation in competing successfully for the Academic prizes then in vogue. The *Éloge de Molière* is perhaps his most accomplished essay in this direction, though it is of no particular significance as criticism. With these honours and the successful production, in 1764, of his comedy *La Jeune Indienne*, we find Chamfort fairly launched in Parisian society, faring sumptuously every day—in other people's houses, petted by great ladies, for he was good-looking and had a gift for flirtation, and under the affectionate care of the "nursing mother of the philosophers," Madame Helvetius. Henceforth his career seemed shaped out for him. Though never rich, he had too many wealthy friends for penury to be again a menace to him or his mother, whom, to his credit be it said, he

## PREFACE

supported loyally ; if his health was uncertain it was his own hard living that made it so.

It is easy to mistake the real nature of aristocratic French society in the eighteenth century. We are apt to think of it as haughtily exclusive, divided by a great gulf from the classes below it. The great gulf might be there in theory, but in practice any one of agreeable presence, good manners and a pretty wit was assured a safe passage across. To maintain his position Chamfort had not, it seems, to play the part of toady ; indeed he apparently found the opposite tactics the better. In one of his anecdotes he tells us of a respectful admirer of women who has to confess that, had he despised them, he would have enjoyed the favours of more. In like manner it may be that Chamfort's professed contempt for society endeared him to

## PREFACE

it. The acidity of his reflections no doubt had its charm for a world which delighted in verbal encounters, in dialectic and philosophy, and, while studiously avoiding the practice of morality, showed appreciation of it by packing it into maxims, dialogues, and tales. It is, moreover, one of the redeeming features of a corrupt and frivolous society that, as a rule, it has a sense of humour and can laugh at its own follies. This is what your earnest fanatic cannot do, and accordingly when Chamfort, with his power of seeing more than one side to a question, aimed his sarcasms at the revolutionaries in their turn, he drew down their wrath upon his head.

With Chamfort's progress in society I have not space to deal adequately. Suffice it that he made influential friends, especially amongst

## PREFACE

women, including Marie Antoinette, got various comfortable little pensions settled upon him, travelled, was elected to the Forty Immortals, and, much to the surprise of his friends, married and was devoted to his wife, a clever woman of the world, till her death six months later. Among his best friends was Mirabeau, and, curious as it may seem to those who remember the prominent part taken by the latter in the history of the time, his relation to Chamfort was that of disciple to master. With all Mirabeau's vigour he lacked the other's subtlety and tact, and he came to regard him as a kind of external conscience. "Never a day passes . . . in which I do not find myself saying—" *Chamfort froncerait le sourcil, ne faisons pas, n'écrivons pas cela.*" So far indeed did Mirabeau carry his admiration, that he employed Chamfort, as the

## PREFACE

young preacher had done, to write his speeches for him. So says Rivarol, to whom Mirabeau appeared "a great sponge always swollen with the ideas of others," and documentary evidence bears him out.

On the outbreak of the revolution, Chamfort, much to the indignant surprise of his aristocratic friends, who had not perhaps taken his advanced views very seriously, threw in his lot with the popular party. For a time he was secretary of the Jacobin Club, and we discover the fine gentleman of the salons among the stormers of the Bastille. The sincerity of Chamfort's revolutionary fervour has been questioned, and brooding over the stigma of his birth assigned as its real cause. But we may allow, I think, that he genuinely believed the overcharged political and social atmosphere required a

## PREFACE

beneficent revolutionary thunderstorm to clear it. Had not he, moreover, been among the prophets? To him the final outburst was no matter for surprise. Whatever his motives, he was a valuable acquisition to his new associates, and his biting wit won him in the Clubs the nickname of "La Rochefoucauld Chamfort." But in time he developed an unfortunate habit of finding the weak points of the ruling party and pointing them out in his pungent fashion. In his famous "*sois mon frère ou je vous tue*," he tersely summed up Jacobin pretensions, and the Jacobins not unnaturally resented this and other witticisms. In short he was haled before the tribunal, imprisoned, then released, but only to be threatened with imprisonment again. This harassed existence was too much for poor Chamfort, and, rather than endure a new



## PREFACE

captivity, he attempted suicide with a pistol and a razor. Unluckily he only succeeded in wounding himself horribly, and lingered on for some months longer. His death took place on April 13, 1794. Chamfort's is not altogether a sympathetic personality, but one cannot grudge a regret over the miserable end of a brilliant career.

It was not, one must insist, the career of a great man of letters. Had Chamfort left nothing behind him but the mediocre literary baggage which fills the greater part of the five volumes of his works edited by M. Auguis in 1824, he would be no more than a name to us, one of the mob of gentlemen who write with ease and most assuredly do *not* write for posterity. His verses, his *éloges*, his comedies, the tragedy which he wrote since everybody had

## PREFACE

to father a tragedy, have the dust of oblivion thick upon him, dust little like to be disturbed save by the curious student. It is as a talker, the greatest of his age, that Chamfort survives. His collection of anecdotes, told with inimitable verve and terseness, forms a document of capital importance to the social historian ; but it is in the maxims and *pensées*, coinage of his own incisive wit, that we find the man at his best. Comparison with his great predecessor in this field, La Rochefoucauld, is inevitable, but Chamfort emerges from it with little loss of credit. If he lack La Rochefoucauld's breadth, serenity, restraint, and universality of penetration, he surpasses the elder moralist in passion, daring, and, one may add, sincerity. Chamfort does not stand aloof from the world whose weak points he touches, now in pity, now in scorn ;

## PREFACE

his sayings are instinct with personality ; behind the aphorism we behold the man, a latter-day Ecclesiastes, who, nevertheless, has visions at times of a Promised Land beyond the wilderness.

As regards form, Chamfort's *pensées* are well nigh perfect. He had of course the advantage of writing them in the language best fitted for the purpose, but even this allowed, they are masterpieces of pregnant brevity. "Those people," said Balzac of Chamfort and his contemporary Rivarol, "put whole volumes into a single *bon mot*, while nowadays 'tis a marvel if we find a *bon mot* in a volume." This is the extravagance of praise. In more measured terms John Stuart Mill and Schopenhauer expressed their admiration of the genius displayed in Chamfort's *pensées*, those "*flèches acérées*," to quote Sainte-Beuve, "*qui arrivent*

## PREFACE

*brusquement et sifflent encore."* Yes, for, after all, we have not made such wonderful progress since Chamfort's day, but that some of these keen arrows of his find their mark still.

W. G. H.

*January, 1902.*

\* \* \* It is perhaps a point of some interest from a bibliographical point of view, that this is the first translation into English of any of Chamfort's writings.

## The Cynic's Breviary.

NATURE has not said to me: Be not poor; still less: Be rich. But she cries out to me: Be independent.

"THE difference between you and myself," said a friend to me, "is that you have said to all the masqueraders: 'I know you,' whilst I have left them the hope that they are deceiving me. That is why the world favours me more than you. It is a masked ball, the interest of which you have spoiled for others and the amusement for yourself."

A MAN of wit is lost, if to his wit he does not join energy of character. If you have the lantern of Diogenes, you must also have his cudgel.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

THERE are more fools than wise men, and even in the wise man himself there is more folly than wisdom.

THE worst wasted of all days is that during which one has not laughed.

THE best philosophical attitude to adopt towards the world is a union of the sarcasm of gaiety with the indulgence of contempt.

WE must be just before being generous, as we must possess shirts before having lace embroideries.

EDUCATION must have two foundations—morality as a support for virtue, prudence as a defence for self against the vices of others. By letting the balance incline to the side of morality, you only make dupes or martyrs; by letting it incline to the other, you make calculating egoists. The one great social principle is to be just both to yourself and to others. If you must love

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEF

your neighbour as yourself, it is at least as fair to love yourself as your neighbour.

PUBLIC opinion is a jurisdiction which the honest man must never fully recognize, and which he must never ignore.

It must be admitted that to live in the world without from time to time acting a part is impossible. What distinguishes the honest man from the knave is, that the former only does so when absolutely obliged and to escape a danger, while the latter seeks for opportunities.

A MAN who is not only honest but wise owes it to himself to add to the prudence that satisfies his conscience, the prudence that foresees and disarms calumny.

I CANNOT conceive of a wisdom that lacks distrust: according to the Scriptures the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God—I believe it is rather the fear of men.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEF

WE must needs have the power of uniting contraries: love of virtue with indifference to public opinion, taste for work with indifference to glory, attention to health with indifference to life.

THERE are few vices that prevent a man from having many friends so much as his too high qualities prevent him.

VANITY is often the motive that forces a man to summon up all the energy of his soul. Wood added to a steel point makes a dart, two feathers added to the wood make an arrow.

A MAN of no principles is also, as a rule, a man of no character, for had he been born with character, he would have felt the need of forming principles.

NEARLY all men are slaves for the same reason that the Spartans assigned for the servitude of the Persians—lack of power to pronounce the syllable, No. To be able to utter that word and



## THE CYNIC'S BRIEF

live alone, are the only two means to preserve one's freedom and one's character.

WHAT I have learnt I no longer know; what I still know has come to me by intuition.

MAN can aspire to virtue; he cannot reasonably aim at finding truth.

MAN reaches each stage in his life as a novice.

THE majority of human beings in the world pass their lives in it so heedlessly and think so little, that they do not know that world which they have before their eyes every day. They do not, M. de B. wittily remarked, for the same reason that cockchafers have no acquaintance with natural history.

'Tis not generally known how much wit a man requires to avoid being ridiculous.

"ARE you not ashamed to wish to speak better than you can?" said Seneca to one of

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEF

his sons who could not work out the exordium of an oration he was composing. One might say the same to those who adopt principles stronger than their character will bear. "Are you not ashamed of wishing to be more of a philosopher than you can be?"

IN great actions men show themselves as they ought to be, in small actions as they are.

VAIN is equivalent to empty; thus vanity is so miserable a thing, that one cannot give it a worse name than its own. It proclaims itself for what it is.

HE is far advanced in the study of morals who can lay his finger on all the points that distinguish pride from vanity. The first is lofty, calm, dignified, imperturbable, resolute; the second mean, inconstant, easily swayed, restless, unsteady. One raises a man, the other puffs him up. The first is source of a thousand virtues, the second that of nearly all vices and all caprices. There is a kind of pride in which

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEF

are comprised all the commandments of God, a kind of vanity that embodies the seven deadly sins.

**CELEBRITY:** the advantage of being known to those who do not know you.

**THE** love of glory a virtue! A strange virtue truly, that calls to its aid the co-operation of all the vices, that finds stimulants in ambition, envy, vanity, sometimes even avarice! Would Titus have been Titus had he had as his ministers Sejanus, Narcissus, and Tigellinus?

**IN** order to forgive reason for the evil it has wrought on the majority of men, we must imagine for ourselves what man would be without his reason. 'Tis a necessary evil.

**THOUGHT** consoles us for all, and heals all. If at times it does you ill, ask it for the remedy for that ill and it will give it you.

**THAT** to feel makes one think is pretty generally admitted; that to think makes one feel finds less acceptance, but is almost as true.

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

THE intelligence is often to the heart what the library of a mansion is to the person of its master.

A BAD man will occasionally do a good action. One might say that he wishes to see whether it gives as much pleasure as honest folk assert.

STUPIDITY would not be absolute stupidity did it not fear intelligence. Vice would not be absolute vice did it not hate virtue.

ONE suspects the idleness of a knave and the silence of a fool.

GENEROSITY is the pitifulness of noble hearts.

ALL passions are exaggerated, otherwise they would not be passions.

"THE manner in which I see you distributing praise and blame," said M. de B—— to a friend, "would make the best man in the world anxious to be defamed."

FALSE modesty is the most decent of all deceptions.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

THERE are certain failings that preserve one from some epidemic vices, just as it may be noted that in time of plague fever-stricken patients escape contagion.

THE philosopher who would fain extinguish his passions resembles the chemist who would like to let his furnace go out.

ONE of the great misfortunes of man is that even his good qualities are sometimes useless to him, and that the art of profiting by them and governing them wisely is often the tardy fruit of experience alone.

NATURE in causing reason and the passions to be born at one and the same time apparently wished by the latter gift to distract man from the evil she had done him by the former, and by only permitting him to live for a few years after the loss of his passions seems to show her pity by early deliverance from a life that reduces him to reason as his sole resource.

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

HOPE is but a charlatan that ceases not to deceive us. For myself happiness only began when I had lost it. I would fain inscribe upon the gate of Paradise the line that Dante wrote upon that of Hell—"Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate."

OUR reason sometimes makes us as unhappy as our passions, and in such a case one can say of a man that he is a patient poisoned by his physician.

IT is nature's will that wise men have their illusions as well as fools, to the end that they be not made too unhappy by their own wisdom.

THAT tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Bible is a fine allegory. Is it not intended to signify that when one has penetrated to the depths of things, the consequent loss of illusions brings about the death of the soul—that is to say a complete detachment from all that moves and interests other men?

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

THE physical world appears the work of a good and mighty Being who has had to abandon the execution of part of his plan to a maleficent Being. But the moral world seems rather the production of a crazy fiend's caprices.

WHEN I hear it argued that, taking everything into account, the least sensitive folk are the happiest, I remember the Indian proverb: "Better to be seated than standing, better to be lying than seated, but better than all else to be dead."

LIVING is a disease from the pains of which sleep eases us every sixteen hours; sleep is but a palliative, death alone is the cure.

TIME diminishes for us the intensity of *absolute* pleasures, to use the metaphysician's term, but apparently it increases *relative* pleasures; and I suspect that this is the artifice by which nature is able to attach men to life after the loss of the objects or pleasures which most rendered it agreeable.

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

SOME ONE described Providence as the baptismal name of chance; no doubt some pious person will retort that chance is the nickname of Providence.

M. — said to me, *à propos* of his constant offences against digestion, and of the pleasures in which he indulged—the only obstacles to his regaining his health: “I should be marvellously well if it were not for myself.”

NATURE seems to make use of men for the accomplishment of her designs without concerning herself about her instruments, like tyrants who rid themselves of those who have been of service to them.

THERE is no need to regard Burrhus as an absolutely virtuous man; he is only so, contrasted with Narcissus. Seneca and Burrhus are the honest men of an age in which there are none.

IN order to sum up in a single word the rarity of honest folk, a friend remarked to me that in



## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

society the honest man is a variety of the human species.

I USED to know a misanthrope who in his good-humoured moments would say: "I should not be at all surprised if there were an honest man hidden away in some corner without any one knowing of him."

THE thrifty man is the richest, the miser the poorest of men.

AN empty headed fellow who has a passing flash of wit astonishes and scandalises one as does a cab horse at a gallop.

I SHOULD advise any one who wishes to obtain a favour of a minister to accost him with an air of melancholy rather than one of gaiety. We do not like to see others happier than ourselves.

HE that is precisely midway between our enemy and ourselves seems to us nearer our enemy; this is but an effect of optical laws, like

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

that by which the jet of a fountain seems less distant from the other side of the basin than from that where we are standing.

It was said of a man who was always conjuring up gloomy chimæras and saw only the dark side of everything: "He builds dungeons in Spain."

MADAME DE ROCHEFORT was asked if she were anxious to know the future. "No," she replied, "it is too like the past."

THE new friends whom we make after attaining a certain age and by whom we would fain replace those whom we have lost, are to our old friends what glass eyes, false teeth and wooden legs are to real eyes, natural teeth and legs of flesh and bone.

By learning the evil elements in nature we despise death, by learning those of society we despise life.

SOCIETY would be a charming affair if we were only interested in one another.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

"IN the world," remarked some one to me, "you have three kinds of friends: the friends who love you, the friends who do not trouble their heads about you, and the friends who hate you."

IT must be admitted that in order to live happy in the world there are sides to the soul which we must absolutely paralyse.

MAN under present social conditions seems to me corrupted more by his reason than by his passions. His passions—I mean those that characterise the primitive man—have preserved for society the few natural elements it still possesses.

SPEAKING generally, were society not an artificial structure, every simple and genuine feeling would not produce the great effect it does; it would give pleasure without surprise, but, as a matter of fact, it both surprises and pleases. Our surprise is a satire on society, our pleasure an act of homage to nature.

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

OFTEN man lives by himself and he has need of virtue ; he lives with others and he has need of honour.

ARE you the friend of a gentleman about the Court, of a man of quality, as the saying is, and do you wish to inspire in him the warmest affection of which the human heart is capable? If so, do not confine yourself to lavishing on him the tenderest cares of friendship, to helping him out of his troubles, consoling him in affliction, consecrating your every moment to him, saving on occasion his life or his honour. Do not waste your time on such trifles ; do more, do better—work out his genealogical tree.

THERE is a wide-spread belief that the art of pleasing is a valuable means of making one's fortune. But to know how to be bored is an art which gives far better results ; indeed talent for making a fortune like that for succeeding with women, can almost be reduced to that art.

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

THE great always sell their society to the vanity of the little.

A PHILOSOPHER who had retired from the world wrote me a letter full of good advice and common sense. It concluded with these words : " Farewell, my friend ; maintain if you can the interests that bind you to society, but cultivate the feelings that cut you away from it."

SUCH is the miserable condition of men, that they must needs seek consolation in society for the evils of nature, and in nature for the evils of society. How many have failed to find either in one or the other distraction from their troubles !

M.— WAS reproached for his love of solitude. " You see," he said, " I am more accustomed to my own failings than to those of other people."

WEAKNESS of character or lack of ideas, in a word all that can withhold us from living a solitary life, are things that preserve many a man from misanthropy.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

"WHY Madame de L. should be so anxious for me to visit her," said a friend to me, "I do not know, for when some time has elapsed without my going I despise her less." The same might be said of the world in general.

I ASKED M. N—— why he had ceased to go into society. "Because," he replied, "I no longer love the women and I know the men."

SOCIETY, what people call the world, is nothing more than the war of a thousand petty opposed interests, an eternal strife of all the vanities, which, turn in turn wounded and humiliated one by the other, intercross, come into collision, and on the morrow expiate the triumph of the eve in the bitterness of defeat. To live alone, to remain unjustled in this miserable struggle, where for a moment one draws the eyes of the spectators, to be crushed a moment later—this is what is called being a nonentity, having no existence. Poor humanity!

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

WHAT makes the success of many books consists in the affinity there is between the mediocrity of the author's ideas and those of the public.

THE majority of the books of our time give one the impression of having been manufactured in a day out of books read the day before.

THERE are well-dressed foolish ideas just as there are well-dressed fools.

IT is when their age of passions is past that great men produce their masterpieces, just as it is after volcanic eruptions that the soil is most fertile.

THE tragic drama has the great moral drawback of attaching too high an importance to life and death.

SPERON-SPERONI admirably explains how it is that an author who, in his own opinion, delivers himself clearly, is sometimes obscure to his reader. "It is because," he says, "the author

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

proceeds from the thought to the expression, the reader from the expression to the thought."

A MAN is not clever simply because he has many ideas, just as he is not necessarily a good general because he has many soldiers.

A POETASTER asked Chamfort's opinion on a couplet. "Excellent," he said, "were it not for its length."

SOME one has said that to plagiarise from the ancients is to play the pirate beyond the Equator, but that to steal from the moderns is to pick pockets at street corners.

AN interesting work might be compiled which would point out all the noxious ideas concerning the human spirit, society and morality, to be found argued or implicit in the most celebrated writings and the most highly revered authors; ideas which propagate religious superstition, evil political principles, despotism, class pride and popular prejudices of every kind. Such a



## THE CYNIC'S BRIEF

work would demonstrate that nearly all books corrupt, and that the best do almost as much harm as good.

THERE are two classes of moralists and political writers; those who have only seen human nature on its detestable or absurd side, and they form the greater number: Lucian, Montaigne, La Bruyère, La Rochefoucauld, Swift, Mandeville, Helvetius, &c.; those who have only seen it on its finer side and in its perfection like Shaftesbury and some others. The first know nothing of the palace, the pig-sties of which are all that they have seen; the second are enthusiasts, who turn their eyes far from all that offends them, but that, none the less, exists. *Est in medio verum.*

PHYSICAL scourges and the calamities of human nature rendered society necessary. Society has added to natural misfortunes. The drawbacks of society have made government necessary, and government adds to society's

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

misfortunes. There is the history of human nature in a nutshell.

MEN's ideas are like cards and other games. Ideas which I remember to have seen regarded as dangerous and over-bold have since become commonplace and almost trite, and have descended to men little worthy of them. So it is that some of the ideas which to-day we call audacious will be considered feeble and conventional by our descendants.

It has been observed that writers on physics, natural history, physiology, and chemistry, are, as a rule, men of mild, equable temperament and happy; whilst, on the contrary, writers on politics, law, and even ethics, are of a sad and melancholy cast of mind. Nothing can be more simple: the former study nature, the latter society, the former contemplate the work of the supreme Being, the latter confine their gaze to the work of men. The respective results must needs be diverse.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

SAID a witty misanthrope to me *à propos* of the iniquities of men, "It is only the uselessness of the first Deluge that preserves us from being visited by a second."

THERE are periods when public opinion is the worst of opinions.

THE majority of our social institutions seem to have as object the maintenance of man in a mediocrity of ideas and emotions, which renders him best fitted to govern or be governed.

THERE is no man who can be by himself alone so contemptible as a body of men, and there is no body of men that can be so contemptible as the public at large.

IT may be argued that every public idea, every accepted convention, is a piece of stupidity, for has it not commended itself to the greatest number?

THE public is governed as it reasons. It is its right to say foolish things, as it is that of the ministers to do them.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

A CERTAIN witty advocate remarked : " One would risk being disgusted if one saw politics, justice, and one's dinner in the making."

'Tis easier to make certain things legal than to make them legitimate.

EXPERIENCE which enlightens private persons corrupts princes and officials.

HAD any one told Adam, on the day following the death of Abel, that some centuries later there would be places where, in an enclosure of twelve square miles, seven or eight hundred thousand people would be concentrated, piled one upon another, do you imagine he would have believed it possible that such multitudes could ever live together? Would he not have conceived an idea of the crimes and monstrosities that would be committed under such conditions much more terrible than the reality has proved? This is a point we ought to bear in mind, as a consolation for the drawbacks of these extraordinary assemblages of human beings.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

WERE a historian like Tacitus to write a history of the best of our kings, giving an exact account of all the tyrannical acts and abuses of authority, the majority of which lie buried in the profoundest obscurity, there would be few reigns which would not inspire us with the same horror as that of Tiberius.

OFTEN in early youth an opinion or custom seems absurd to us, which, with advancing years, we discover has some justification and so appears less absurd. Ought we to conclude from this that certain customs are not so ridiculous as others? One might sometimes be tempted to think that they were established by people who had read the book of life through, and that they are judged by those who, despite their intelligence, have only glanced at a few pages.

LIKE animals that cannot breathe at a certain altitude without perishing, the slave dies in the atmosphere of freedom.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEF

It is unfortunate for men, fortunate perhaps for tyrants, that the poor and unhappy have not the instinct or pride of the elephant which does not reproduce itself in servitude.

THERE is no history worthy attention save that of free nations; the history of nations under the sway of despotism is no more than a collection of anecdotes.

WILL it be believed that despotism has its partisans on the ground of the necessity for encouraging the fine arts? The brilliancy of the reign of Louis XIV. has to an incredible extent multiplied the number of those who think thus. According to them the crowning glory of all human society is to have fine tragedies, fine comedies and other works of art. There are those who willingly forgive all the evil wrought by priests, since without the priests we should not have had the comedy of *Tartuffe*.

WHAT is a cardinal? He is a priest clad in scarlet, who receives a hundred thousand crowns

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

from the king, to flout him in the name of the pope.

SOCIETY is composed of two great classes—those who have more dinners than appetite, and those who have more appetite than dinners.

CHANGE in fashion is the tax which the industry of the poor levies on the vanity of the rich.

IT is an incontestable fact that there are in France seven million folk who beg for alms, and another twelve millions who are too poor to give them.

THE nobility, say the nobles, is an intermediary between the king and the people. . . . Precisely; just as the hound is the intermediary between the huntsman and the hares.

FRANCE is a country where it is often useful to exhibit one's vices, and invariably dangerous to exhibit one's virtues.

A FRIEND said to me *à propos* of some ridiculous ministerial blunders: "If it were not

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

for the government, we should have nothing left to laugh at in France."

IN France we leave unmolested those who set fire to the house and persecute those who sound the alarm bell.

PARIS is a city of gaieties and pleasures, where four fifths of the inhabitants die of grief.

WHEN princes condescend to emerge from their miserable systems of etiquette it is never in favour of a man of merit, but of a wench or a buffoon. When women forget themselves it is never for love of an honest man but of a rascal. In short when people break the yoke of public opinion, it is rarely to rise above it, nearly always to descend below it.

ONE must make choice between loving women and knowing them ; there is no middle course.

NATURALISTS tell us that in all animal species degeneration begins in the female. In civilised society philosophers can apply this observation to morals.



## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

APPARENTLY nature, in giving man an absolutely irradicable taste for women, must have foreseen that, without this precaution, the contempt inspired by the vices of their sex, vanity in particular, would be a great obstacle to the maintenance and propagation of the human species.

A MAN who professed to esteem women highly was asked if he had enjoyed the favours of many. "Not so many as if I had despised them," he said.

WHATEVER evil a man may think of women, there is no woman but thinks more.

YOUNG women have a misfortune which they share with kings, that of having no friends; but happily they feel this misfortune as little as the kings: the latter's pomp and the former's vanity spare both that emotion.

MADAME DE MONTMORIN said to her son: "You are going into society: I have only one

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

piece of advice to give you, and that is to be in love with all the women."

A WITTY woman told me one day what may well be the secret of her sex: it is that every woman in choosing a lover takes more account of the way in which other women regard the man than of her own.

THE woman who esteems herself more for her gifts of soul or intelligence than for her beauty is above her sex. She who esteems herself more for her beauty than for her intelligence or soul is of her sex. But she who esteems herself more for her birth or rank than for her beauty is outside her sex, beneath it.

MADAME DE TALMONT, seeing M. de Richelieu neglecting her to pay attentions to Madame de Brionne, a very beautiful woman, but said to be rather stupid, remarked to him: "You are not blind, Marshall, but I cannot help thinking you a little deaf."

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

MADemoiselle DUTHÉ having lost a lover, and the affair causing some talk, a man who called to see her found her playing the harp, and said with surprise: "Good heavens! I was expecting to find you desolated with grief." "Ah," she exclaimed in a pathetic tone, "you ought to have seen me yesterday!"

A WOMAN was at a performance of the tragedy of *Méropé*, and did not weep: surprise was expressed. "I could cry my eyes out," she said, "but I have to go out to supper to-night."

A YOUNG man was advised to ask a woman of forty, with whom he had been head over ears in love, to return his letters. "I don't suppose she has them any longer," he said. "Oh yes," was the reply, "about the age of thirty women begin to keep their love letters."

"HE who has not seen much of *demi-mondaines* does not understand women at all," gravely remarked to me a fond admirer of his own wife, who was unfaithful to him.

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFING

I REMEMBER to have seen a man forsaking the society of ballet girls because, so he said, he had found them as deceitful as honest women.

SOMEONE remarked of a lady who was not venal, followed her heart's promptings, and remained faithful to the object of her choice, "She is a charming woman and lives as virtuously as is possible outside marriage and celibacy."

WOMEN only give to friendship what they borrow from love.

LOVE as it exists in society is nothing more than the exchange of two fancies and the contact of two epidermes.

DUCLOS was speaking one day of the paradise that everyone imagines for himself in his own way. "Here are the ingredients for yours, Duclos," said Madame de Rochefort; "Wine, bread, and cheese, and the first woman who might come on the scene."

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

APPARENTLY love does not seek real perfections—one might say it fears them. It only loves those which it creates or supposes, and so resembles those monarchs who only recognise the great things they themselves have achieved.

A MAN in love who pities the reasonable man seems to me like one who reads fairy tales and jeers at those who read history.

LOVE resembles epidemic diseases; the more one fears them, the more liable is one to infection.

IN witnessing or experiencing the pains inseparable from intense feeling in love and friendship, be it by the death of the loved person or by the accidents of life, one is tempted to believe that dissipation and frivolity are not such great follies after all, and that life is scarce worth more than what fashionable folk make of it.

MARRIAGE follows on love as smoke on flame,

LOVE gives greater pleasure than marriage for the same reason that romances are more amusing than history.

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

ONE of the best reasons you can have for never marrying is not so much that you are the woman's dupe as that she is not yours.

BOTH marriage and celibacy have their respective drawbacks: we shall be wise if we make choice of that which is not irremediable.

FOR thirty years a certain man went to spend every evening with Mme. —. When his wife died his friends believed he would marry the other, and urged him to do so. "No, no," he said, "if I did, where should I have to spend my evenings?"

I WAS sitting at dinner beside a man who asked me if the lady opposite him was the wife of the gentleman at her side. I had noticed that the latter had not exchanged a word with his neighbour, so I replied: "He either does not know her or else she is his wife."

LORD BOLINGBROKE gave Louis XIV. a thousand proofs of affectionate attention during

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

a very dangerous illness. The king with some astonishment remarked: "I am the more touched by it because you English do not love kings." "Sire," replied Bolingbroke, "we are like those husbands who, having no love for their own wives, are only the more eager to please those of their neighbours."

To turn a widow from the idea of marrying again, one of her friends remarked to her: "Don't you see that it is a very fine thing to bear the name of a man who can no longer make a fool of himself?"

THE sincerest of affections lays the soul open to petty passions. Marriage makes your soul liable to your wife's petty passions also, ambition, vanity, and the like.

LA GABRIELLI, a celebrated singer, having asked 5,000 ducats from the Empress of Russia as her fee for singing at St. Petersburg for two months, the latter replied: "I pay none of my field marshalls on that scale." "In that case,"

## THE CYNIC'S BRIEFCASE

said La Gabrielli, "Your Majesty has only to make your field marshalls sing." The Empress paid the 5,000 ducats without further demur.

A PRINT-SELLER asked, on June 25th, a high price for a portrait of Madame Lamotte, who had been flogged and branded on the 21st, giving as his reason that it was a proof before letters.

AN entertainment manager was asking M. de Villars to waive the right of free admission for the king's pages. "You must observe, my lord," he said, "that several pages make a volume."

MARSHALL DE BIRON had a very dangerous illness; he wished to confess himself, and said before several of his friends: "What I owe to God, what I owe to the king, what I owe to the State—" "Hush, hush," interrupted one of his friends, "you will die insolvent."

SOME young courtiers were supping with M. de Conflans. The first song of the evening was



## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

broad but not too improper: Immediately thereafter, however, M. de Fronsac rose and sang some abominable couplets which amazed the company, gay as it was. There was a dead silence, broken by M. de Conflans, who observed: "Fronsac, you surprise me! There are ten bottles of champagne between that song and the first."

A WOMAN of ninety said to M. de Fontenelle, then ninety-five: "Death has forgotten us." "Hush!" replied M. de Fontenelle, putting his finger to his lips.

To obtain dry weather, it was arranged to have a procession with the shrine of St. Geneviève. Scarcely had the cortège started, however, than it began to rain. On which the Bishop of Castres wittily remarked: "The saint is mistaken—she believes we are asking her for rain."

I ONCE heard an orthodox person denouncing those who discuss articles of faith. "Gentlemen," he said naïvely, "a true Christian does

## THE CYNIC'S BREVIARY

not examine what he is ordered to believe. Dogma is like a bitter pill: if you chew it, you will never be able to swallow it."

M. DE —— asked a certain bishop for a country house of his which he never occupied. "Don't you know," said the bishop, "that a man ought always to have some place to which he never goes, but where he believes he would be happy?" "Yes," replied M. de ——, "it is quite true—that is what has made the fortune of Paradise."

RULHIÈRE said to him one day: "I have only been guilty of one baseness all my life." "When will it end?" asked Chamfort.

---

PRINTED BY R. FOLKARD AND SON,  
22, DEVONSHIRE STREET, QUEEN SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.

# The Vigo Cabinet Series

*An Occasional Miscellany of Prose and Verse*

*One Shilling, net, each Part*

No 1. THE QUEEN'S HIGHWAY AND OTHER LYRICS  
OF THE WAR, 1891-1900. By the REV. CANON  
SMITH, Warden of Exeter College, Christ Church, Oxon.

"Canon Smith writes admirably. His lyrics have strength and  
modernity. They surely had a wide public." *Daily News*.

No 2. HOME IN WAIL TIME. Poems by SYDNEY HODGKIN.  
Selected and Edited by WILLIAM G. HUTCHINGS.

No 3. SILENCE ABSOLUTE AND OTHER POEMS  
By E. EMMLEY WATSON.

No 4. SEA VERSE. By GEY J. BRADY.

No 5. HAROLD THE SAXON, AND OTHER VERSES  
By THURLEY PAGE. Author of 'Perceptions in  
Holes,' &c.

No 6. THE CYNICS AND VIOLETS. Maxims and Aphorisms  
from NICOMACHUS OF GERMARCEUS. Selected and Trans-  
lated by WILLIAM G. HUTCHINGS.

No 7. URLYN THE HARPER, AND OTHER SONGS  
By WILLIAM WILSON GOSNOLD.

No 8. ILSINS HENRIOT. LYRICAL POEMS. Selected  
and Translated by R. A. STEWART-KELLY.

\* \* \* Other Volumes will be printed as they come.

LONDON: ELKIN MATHEWS, Vigo Street, W.

PO

University of California  
SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY  
305 De Neve Drive - Parking Lot 17 • Box 951388  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90095-1388

Return this material to the library from which it was borrowed.

QUARTER LOAN

JAN 10 2005

UCLA COL LIB  
RECEIVED FEB 16 2005

QUARTER LOAN

OCT 10 2005